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FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS
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RUEHAM/AMEMBASSY AMMAN 6577
RUEHLB/AMEMBASSY BEIRUT 4346
RUEHEG/AMEMBASSY CAIRO 2960
RUEHRH/AMEMBASSY RIYADH 7516
RUEHTV/AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV 1574
RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA 4912
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DEPARTMENT FOR PA, NEA/ARN, INR/IC/CD, INR/R/MR:STHIBEAULT AND
JMCCARTER, VOA NEWS CA, NEA/PPD:CBOURGEOIS, AZAIBACK, AND
AFERNANDEZ, IIP/G/NEA-SA MDAVIDSON
WHITE HOUSE FOR NSC
CENTCOM FOR CCPA

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: KMDR PREL KPAO OPRC SY

SUBJECT: Syria/Palestinians, Lebanon, Syria/Norway, Iraq (2/14)

¶1. Summary: Syrian papers on Feb. 14 reported a mass rally in Damascus on Feb. 13 condemning Israeli excavations near the al-Aqsa Mosque. Papers also reported that President Asad received a letter on Feb. 13 from Palestinian National Authority Chairman Mahmud Abbas. The letter was delivered to Vice President Faruq Shara when he received Rawhi Fattuh, President Abbas' personal envoy, and the delegation accompanying him. Fattuh briefed Shara on Palestinian developments after the signing of the agreement between Fatah and HAMAS in Mecca. In a statement to reporters after the meeting, Fattuh expressed appreciation for Syria's support for the Palestinian people and cause and briefed Al-Shar'a on the agreement, noting that Syria intervened positively in this issue, which paved the way for accord and the major agreement in Mecca. He described the current Palestinian situation as good and said all parties are adhering to the agreement and will support it on the ground to allow the formation of a national unity government.

Papers also reported FM Moualllem's meeting on Feb. 13 with Sevien Sevie, the Norwegian Foreign Minister and Special Envoy to the Middle East. The meeting touched on the latest developments in the region and efforts to revive the Middle East peace process. During the meeting, the Norwegian Envoy hailed Syria's efforts in achieving accord between Hamas and Fatah to form a Palestinian national unity government, stressing Syria's important role in realizing security and stability in the region.

As for events in Lebanon, papers reported that three Lebanese were killed and 24 wounded when two buses exploded in the al-Matn area northeast of Beirut. News reports quoted unnamed Lebanese national figures as holding Israel responsible for the explosions. "The explosions aim at upsetting Lebanon's stability and targeting every attempt to solve the political crisis the country has been undergoing recently," the national Lebanese figures said in a statement on Feb. 13. Papers also quoted the Regional Leadership of the Baath Party in Lebanon as saying that "this awful crime aims at creating a new status of tension and unrest in Lebanon." The leadership pointed out that the timing of this crime came just when a possible solution for the Lebanese crisis appeared: "This confirms the conspiratorial plot which targets every solution and initiative that may save Lebanon," the leadership noted in a statement. Papers quoted Michel Aoun, Head of the Free Patriot Movement, as saying that the explosion was an attempt to strike at Lebanese stability and civil peace.

End of summary.

12. Selected Headlines:

"A message to President Asad from Palestinian President Abbas. VP Shara reiterates Syria's support for Palestinian accord. Fatouh, Special Envoy of Palestinian President Abbas, expresses high appreciation for Damascus' positive efforts" (Government-owned Al-Ba'th, 2/14)

"Damascus expresses vehement and angry condemnation of Israeli aggressions against al-Aqsa mosque in a mass rally" (Government-owned Al-Ba'th, 2/14)

"Speaker of Iraqi Parliament al-Mashhadani discusses the situation of Iraqi refugees in Syria" (Government-owned Al-Thawra, 2/14)

"Lebanese circles condemn Pekfaia explosions, which claimed the lives of 3 Lebanese and wounded 24 others. Lebanese circles consider explosions a response to the climate of relaxation and a translation of Feltman's statements" (Government-owned Tishreen, 2/14)

"Israel denies suspension of excavations at al-Maghriba gate" (Government-owned Al-Thawra, 2/14)

"Olmert: We will be forced to withdraw from the Golan" (Government-owned Al-Ba'th, 2/14)

"Norway confirms Syria's important role in ensuring security and stability in the region" (Government-owned Al-Ba'th, 2/14)

13. Editorial Block Quotes:

"A Stone in Stagnant Water"

Ali Qasim, a commentator in government-owned Al-Thawrah, said (2/14): "The American reaction to Russian President Vladimir Putin's criticism of US policy shows that Washington still rejects any criticism of its policy even though the majority of the nations of the world believe that this policy causes hostility and concern...Q

"Putin's statements open the door wide to a new scene in international relations and reflect an international desire to see a limit to American arrogance, which makes no one feel safe...."

"Disappointment, or Failure?"

Dr. Sa'id Musallam, a commentator in government-owned Al-Thawrah, wrote (2/14): "The disappointment that the White House spokesman expressed after President's Putin's criticism was a result not only of the Russian criticism, but also of American military and political failure in the region...."

"Increasing US losses in Iraq have driven Americans to blame Iran and Al-Qa'ida, in an attempt to divert attention from the national resistance in Iraq...."

"Americans are also disappointed because they have failed to drag Palestinians and Lebanese into sectarian and denominational fighting.... The intra-Palestinian agreement in Mecca was a painful blow to the inclinations of Condoleezza Rice and her allies...."

"Why Wait So Long?"

Umar Jaftali, an editorialist in government-owned Tishrin, maintained (2/14): "Israel will continue to target the Al-Aqsa Mosque as part of its attempts to Judaize Jerusalem and change the city's geographic and demographic character....

"Will Arabs wait for action from the Security Council and the international quartet or will they wake up to this looming danger and act to prevent the loss of the most sacred of rights after the loss of most of Palestine...?"

"Bush's Plan to Change Conflict in Iraq!"

M. Ajjawi, a commentator in government-owned Tishreen, said (2/14): "The Arab region, including Iraq, is witnessing an anti-Iran political and information campaign accusing the Islamic Republic of interference in Iraq through instigation of sectarian strife! The campaign is coupled with accusations by some Arab regimes and the US administration that Iran supports terrorism in Iraq and encourages chaos and instability in the Arab country which is under the Anglo-American occupation....

"The parties that are launching this hostile campaign against Iran have ignored the reality of the occupation which has brought all the chaos, destruction, death and instability to Iraq....

"It is strange that the ill-intentioned campaign is accompanied by the disinformation that the new George Bush plan is a plan for rescuing Iraq...!"

"The real occupation of Arab lands in Iraq, Palestine and other Arab territories in the Golan and South Lebanon becomes a matter of secondary interest, whereas the Iranian menace becomes a top priority to some regimes that are blessed by Washington and the West. The target behind this distortion of facts is to save US policy after its many failures in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere in the world....

"Observers say Bush and his aides decided to pursue the tactics of maneuvering and zigzagging in their political steps and measures concerning the Iraq dilemma....

"Once again, Bush is using the old colonial tactics, as he has failed to conquer the Iraqi resistance. He spares no effort to dismember the Iraqis into communities and ethnic groups with the objective of controlling the whole country....

"The partitioning of Iraq into ethnic and sectarian groups will reflect negatively in Iran. It is not in the interest of Iranians that Iraq be divided. On the contrary, it is in the interest of the American occupation forces...."

Corbin